



Kay Rea's story of Kathy



There was great excitement in London and New York the day my mother was born. Not only was March 7, 1926 the day the world heard the first transatlantic telephone call, but the inhabitants at 27 Annie Street in Sunderland, England, heard the first cries of baby Gladys Kathleen Bainbridge.

Kathy made her entrance into a family that did not expect more children. Her seventeen-year-old sister Lilian helped the local midwife with her delivery. Adored by her often absent father, Kathy was raised in a very strict Victorian manner by her mother. Four years later, another surprise, her sister Audrey was born.

My grandmother would never have been accused of spoiling her children. That children “should be seen and not heard” and “obey without question” were two of her many rules. Mother spoke of the frequent “good hidings” she and her little sister Audrey received. Often, she would say to me, “You should of had a mother like mine,” forgetting that when she became a mother herself, she followed the example of her mother’s rigid parenting techniques.

Dancing became Mother’s passion after starting dance lessons at age seven. My grandmother made beautiful costumes, attended every class and may have been thrilled but never offered any praise. Mother loved performing in dance competitions, where she won several silver medals.

Mother was thirteen when war was declared. Expecting the shipyards nearby to be bombed, her parents considered evacuating the children, but instead the whole family moved to Wales. It was a wise decision, as their old family home was bombed.

When she was sixteen, her father died due to a doctor’s negligence, and my mother was obliged to testify in court, a devastating experience for a teenager. She left school and enrolled in Pitman’s Secretarial College to become a shorthand typist and help support her family. She also had to stop dancing which devastated her.

After graduating she worked for Bailey’s in Newport. There she met her future husband, who was visiting a friend at the company. While practicing dance steps on the landing, she heard applause from a handsome pilot in a RAF uniform. It was love at first sight for them both, and she immediately forgot about her current boyfriend. The war interrupted their relationship, but they wrote each other love letters for three years: he from India, she from Wales. He returned home in September 1945, and they resumed their relationship with renewed, youthful passion. They had survived the war and were anxious to start a life together.

When they married in 1946; England was reeling from the effects of the war. Essentials were still rationed, there was a shortage of housing, and the economic future looked grim for the newlyweds. They moved in with my grandmother, and by 1949 their family had grown to include me and my younger sister, Barbara. My mother was unhappy living with her mother; my father and grandmother did not get along and when the situation became unbearable, my father decided to immigrate to Canada. My mother didn’t really want to move that far away from her family but went along.

On April 4, 1955, our family arrived in New York City, after a frightening five-day voyage across the stormy Atlantic. We then traveled to and settled in Vancouver, where life was better than in England. Dad had trained as a pilot on Vancouver Island before the war and remembered it fondly. But my mother was unhappy. Her doctor prescribed tranquilizers and sleeping pills. This was the beginning of a 53-year addiction to prescription drugs.

Stress in the family increased when my mother found employment easily, while my father had challenges. Mother worked as a secretary in a real estate office and was a part-time court stenographer. Dad attended university before the war and had owned a business, but was not trained to do anything other than fly. He was ahead of his time with so many entrepreneurial ideas; unfortunately, few succeeded. Concerned about appearances, he wanted to support his family unaided by his wife's wages. My mother loved and needed the attention she received at work, but my father was also possessive of his lovely blond wife. This caused more tension and explosive arguments in the family.

My status-conscious, strict parents decided to enroll my sister and me in private school, and at about the same time we moved from Richmond to West Vancouver. Both these events taxed their already meager bank account.

In 1964, my mother became pregnant for the third time, at age 38. She was good at her job and enjoyed working, but women in the 1960s were unceremoniously fired when discovered to be expecting. Mentally fragile, she was also nervous about having a baby after a fifteen year gap and unhappy about losing her job. She felt isolated, trapped. Dad insisted she take no pills while pregnant. Luckily she did not.

When her water broke, she fell, and as a result the baby turned. Mother was immediately admitted to Lions Gate hospital. Thirty-six hours later the baby still refused to be born. Her doctor, for reasons unknown, did not recommend a caesarian section. By now Mother had lost consciousness and we were frantic. Fortunately, there was a nurse on duty who was an experienced midwife from England. Risking her job, she took Dad aside and told him if the baby was not born at once, both my mother and the baby would die. Dad raised the alarm, insisted another doctor be called, and our beautiful little sister, Elizabeth Anne (nicknamed Lisa), arrived by caesarian section just minutes before midnight. She was a lovely shade of blue, but otherwise healthy. Now we were a family of three girls aged seventeen, fifteen and ten minutes. My mother was prescribed more medication to help her recover from the birth and postpartum depression.

Soon after Lisa's arrival, Mother became pregnant again. This baby was not so fortunate. At that time there was a strict process involved in getting approval to have the pregnancy terminated. For a long time afterwards, Mother was tormented with guilt mixed with relief.

Several months after the terminated pregnancy, Mother was admitted to the activation wing at LionsGateHospital to undergo psychological evaluation. Weeks later she returned home apathetic, with a vacant look on her face and another prescription.

In 1966, my father decided to move the family back to London. Mother realized she was happier in Canada. When my mother was miserable, the whole family was miserable. After five unhappy months, we were back in Canada, starting over again.

My slim mother now began to gain weight. Her doctor prescribed diet pills that contained amphetamines. Depressed about her size, she stopped eating. In 1969, my mother, at 5' 6" weighed 98 pounds. We didn't have a name for her condition, but we know now she was anorexic. While my sister and I were away in Europe, she fell and broke her hip. Returning home we found her confined to bed in a dreamlike state.

Mentally, she continued to deteriorate and slept all day. Regulations around prescription refills were not as stringent then as they are today, and she was able to manipulate the system. Like an alcoholic, she hid her pills in unlikely places, including taping them to the underside of drawers. We didn't understand her temper or mood swings. We didn't know what to believe of her stories, which shifted with her audience.

She became more strict and unreasonable with Barbara and me. It fell upon us to look after our little sister, now five years old, as Mother was less interested in her and more abusive.

Dad insisted she stop taking the diet pills. She went through withdrawal and soon weighed 225 pounds. The extra weight put pressure on her artificial hip, requiring her to have a second hip replacement. She decided the only way to lose weight now without diet pills was to become bulimic.

We realized she had problems but there was little we could do to help. She must have felt abandoned. We didn't know if her behaviour was who she was or an effect of the drugs she was taking. She gained attention from being sick – from doctors, her friends and us – but she also appeared to be on a path of self destruction.

We heard the word duty a lot; my parents felt that any money we had was theirs. When my mother demanded the tuition money my sister had saved up and threatened her with a kitchen knife, my sister and I left home.

When my little sister Lisa was eleven, Mother went to work at a bank. They needed the money, she was a very good typist and liked flirting with co-workers, but she didn't like getting up in the morning. When her mother died and Mother went back to England for the funeral, she extended her ten day absence to three months and lost her job.

She had exquisite timing in her illnesses. Whenever anyone had a trip away, she would come down with something. Telegrams would fly, asking everyone to come home right now. And then she would recover.

My mother was a bundle of contradictions. She was fussy about keeping a clean house, but hated housework. She took exceptional care with her appearance, but abused her health and body with drugs. She avoided cooking and struggled with her weight, but ate an unhealthy diet and didn't exercise. Drugs interfered with her ability to love herself and care for her family. With friends she was entertaining and charming. She would remember her hairdresser's birthday but rarely ours. She liked to party, but seldom drank, hating the expense. She's wearing sunglasses in my wedding pictures.

When Dad died in 1988, there was a shift in her personality. He left her with almost nothing, but she was now free of his subtle controlling influence. She became more outgoing, made friends with other women and started wearing cheerful colours instead her usual drab greens and browns. Thanks to my sister's intervention in her finances, she went out more often and freely spent her small allowance.

Mother was superstitious, did not swear and never learned to drive. She was proud of her delicious roast beef dinners and Yorkshire pudding, her only cooking skill. Music played in her house all the time. She went to every dance performance she could afford, had a rare autograph from Nureyev and was still attractive and flirtatious at age 82. Regardless of circumstances she always believed she deserved a privileged life.

She came to my retirement party and told everyone how wonderful I was.

Through her life she had twelve surgeries and numerous procedures, including a hysterectomy, gallbladder removal, mastectomy, a Birch procedure, four hip replacements and four pacemakers. She had kidney failure, heart disease, a broken ankle that never healed, varicose veins, neuropathy, osteoporosis, panic attacks, stomach problems, a hernia, chronic constipation, hemorrhoids, bladder issues, and acid reflux. She was diabetic, had two pulmonary embolisms, eczema, cataracts, arthritis. She would tell us, "When I die, I am going to leave my body to science."

When she died in 2008 she was taking over 40 pills a day. They were her best friends.

Thinking about my mother now, I like to remember what brought her joy. She was proud of her secretarial skills, her excellent memory and loved receiving compliments on her perfect English complexion. She enjoyed wearing fur coats and White Shoulders perfume, having her hair done and nails manicured, eating in restaurants and dancing. She liked to impress us with her extensive knowledge of the Royal Family and movie stars. The TV was always on, tuned to CNN or her favourite soap. She was in love with Bill Clinton.

She would be pleased that I am telling her story.